

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

God has blessed Toby and me with three wonderful children: Dena, Elana and Dov. We were also blessed with a fourth child born between Elana and Dov. His name was Yitzchak Rafael. It will be 40 years ago this coming December that Yitzchak Rafael came into this world. He was affected with a dreadful genetic disease. He lived into his fourth month and then died.

Those days remain a blur. Toby and I were young, inexperienced, unable to handle this horror. And so my parents stepped in. They arranged everything including buying the burial plot for Yitzchak Rafael.

For a few years, Toby and I found it too painful to visit the grave. The time finally came when we felt ready to

go. We called the cemetery and asked for the location of our son's grave. To our deep horror, the cemetery had no listing of a grave for Yitzchak Rafael.

We were frantic. We went to the cemetery to personally ask the staff if they had any record of Yitzchak Rafael's burial spot. They said no. We called the congregation on whose grounds we believed our son was laid to rest. They had no record of his grave. Perhaps, we thought, we had the wrong cemetery. So we visited all the adjoining ones – and still no Yitzchak Rafael. We were stymied, mystified and heart broken. We were deeply pained as we had not put up a gravestone – the least we could do for our child.

Several years ago our dear friend Boris Stern, Roberta Horowitz's father, Bernie Horowitz's father in law, who sat behind me for years in shul, died. I accompanied the family to the cemetery – lo and behold – it turned out to be the cemetery where I always thought Yitzchak Rafael was buried.

Something pulled me to approach the manager in the cemetery office. With my heart beating quickly and hands shaking I said, “I believe my infant son Yitzchak Rafael is buried here – could you check out his burial plot.” The secretary went to the back of the room, returned several minutes later and said, “I'm deeply sorry but we have no record of a Yitzchak Rafael buried here.”

“Would you mind if I check your records myself.” “We don’t usually do this,” she said. Upset, I told her my story, how we could not find our infant dead son. “It’s against protocol, but I’ll make an exception. I’ll allow you to check the record yourself.”

I began going through the old records line by line. They had not been computerized and were hand written. Line by line I read the names aloud. And then I saw it. Yitzchak Rafael was not listed as Yitzchak Rafael Weiss but as Rafael Isaac Weiss. The child’s days of birth and death were aside his name. We had finally found our son.

That Yom Kippur, during Yizkor, right here, I resolved

to put up the proper monument. But I didn't. I don't know why, but I didn't. On every subsequent Yom Kippur yizkor, I made the same resolution. You must do this, I said to myself. But I rationalized, it was almost forty years since his death, so much time had passed. Somehow, inexplicably, I just couldn't bring myself to make the arrangements.

This past year I became close to a gem of a person, a tzadik, Joel Simon, who works at Riverside. One day, I'm not sure why, I told him my story. He embraced me and declared – let me help you put up the monument.

Yom Kippur is a time of teshuvah, of making amends for wrongs committed. Is there ever a time when it's

just too late? Is there ever a time when the statute of limitations has passed? Is there ever a time when it is just too late to say I'm sorry? In my case, after forty year of shameful neglect could I rectify the wrong.

One of the basic messages of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is it's never too late. No wonder we read the story of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael on Rosh Hashana; in fact, the story reverberates with Yom Kippur language.

It all starts when Hagar, Abraham's second wife is afflicted by Sara, Abraham's first wife – and flees to the desert. There, an angel of God tells her that she will have a child with Abraham whose name will be Ishmael. The Torah goes out of its way to record the place where the revelation occurred – *Be'er Lehai Roi*.

The prophecy is fulfilled – Hagar and Abraham have Ishmael.

Eventually, Sara and Abraham have Isaac. Probably to insure that Isaac would be the next patriarch, Sara demands the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. While they are cast out with God's approval, the way they were expelled – with only bread and water – leading to their near death, is criticized by commentators including Rashi and Rashbam (see their commentary to Genesis 24:14). The contemporary Biblical scholar Uriel Simon even refers to the expulsion of Ishmael as the akeidat Ishmael story. This is the painful narrative we read on Rosh Hashana.

Close to forty years pass since the expulsion of Hagar

and Ishmael. Sara has died. Isaac is about to marry Rebecca. As Isaac goes out to meet her for the first time, the Torah tells us from where Isaac was coming:

□ יאר יהל אובמ אב קחציו □ – “And Isaac came from *Be’er Lehai Roi*” (Genesis 24:62). What was Isaac doing in *Be’er Lehai Roi*? And why does the Torah include this seemingly insignificant fact?

Be’er Lehai Roi is the place where Hagar was told Ishmael would be born. As such it was the place from where Hagar may have derived the hope that she would become Abraham’s covenantal wife and Ishmael would become Abraham’s covenantal son. It wasn’t to be. God declares the covenantal future is through Isaac, a reality that contributes to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael.

Could it be that Isaac feels responsible for that expulsion. After all, Hagar and Ishmael may have been thrown out to insure that Isaac would become the next patriarch. And many years later – forty years – he travels to *Be'er Lehai Roi* where Hagar lives, to convince her to remarry Abraham. Precisely when Isaac is about to marry, thereby assuring that he become the next patriarch, he does teshuvah by inviting Hagar back into the family.

The Midrash alludes to this point when explaining why Isaac was coming from *Be'er Lehai Roi* as he meets Rebecca:

□ מימלוע יחל הרמאו ראבה לע הבשיש התוא רגה תא איבהל ךלה □ – “Isaac had gone to bring Hagar, the one who had sat by the well, and sought out God, saying, ‘look at my misery.’” (Bereishit

Rabbah 60:14) Rashi elaborates:

□ תישארב י"שר) הנאשיש ויבא מהרבאל רגה תא איבהל ךלה□
□ – (ב"ס/ד"כ

“Isaac had gone to bring Hagar back to Abraham, that he might take her again as his wife.” (Rashi, Bereishit 24:62)

And when does Isaac come from *Be'er Lehai Roi*? The language of the narrative is Yom Kippur language. The very name of the well which includes *Lehai* invokes the image of Yom Kippur, when one asks for life – □ ונרכז□. As Isaac meets Rebecca the Torah states, □ אציו□. □ הדשב חושל קחצי (Genesis 24:63). The Midrash Menorat Ha'Maor (3:74) notes that the language of *su'ah* is teshuvah – □ חש...תויהל הבושת ילעב לש ןכרד□ – “it is the way of one who repents to be bowed and humble.” Here, the Midrash may be understanding

the sentence □ הדשב חושל קחצי אציו □ to mean that Isaac was contrite as he went out to do teshuvah in the field.

And when Abraham remarries Hagar, she is called Keturah (Genesis 25:1). In the words of the Zohar □ תריטקתאו □ “*ve’itketirat*” – she was perfumed with ketoret, with incense, a word associated with teshuvah (Zohar Genesis 1:133b)

The language here is one of expiation and atonement, the themes of Yom Kippur, pointing to that day being Yom Kippur.^[i] The message is clear: Yom Kippur teaches, “it’s never too late.” It’s many, many years later, but that doesn’t stop Isaac from mending the rift he felt responsible for, it doesn’t stop him from going to *Be’er Lehai Roi* – connecting with Ishmael and bringing Hagar back.

Isaac not only facilitates the rendezvous of Hagar and Abraham, but his own reconciliation with his father, Abraham. The akeidah which the Zohar claims occurred on Yom Kippur, is the story of Abraham and Isaac walking together. In one of its most tender moments, Isaac and Abraham speak to each other for the first time in the Torah. Isaac's first word is □יבא□ – “my father.” Abraham responds, □ינב יונה□ – “here I am, my son” (Genesis 22:7). What an extraordinary moment. A father and son together. As the Torah in the akeidah narrative notes, □ודחי מהינש וכליו□ – “And the two of them walked together” (Genesis 22:6,8).

By the end of the akeidah, father and son, Abraham and Isaac, seem to separate, as the Torah states, □בשיו□ □מהרבא□ – “And Abraham returned” (Genesis 22:19).

Where was Isaac? Something had happened causing them to part company. Could it be that the very trauma of the binding experience had fractured their relationship. Indeed, Isaac is not mentioned after his mother, Sara, died, as participating in her burial. Abraham is preoccupied with the arrangements, not Isaac (Genesis 23).

It would appear from the Midrash we've quoted, the first time Isaac and Abraham see each other again occurs when Isaac marries Rebecca. There, Isaac brings Hagar to Abraham and no doubt sees his father. Isaac, according to some commentators, was a teenager during the akeidah (see Ibn Ezra, Genesis 22:4). Now, many years later, he reconciles with Abraham illustrating once again that it is never too late.

“It’s never too late” is an adage that is easier said than done. First, it requires that the person making the amends be self forgiving in recognizing that even after so much time all is not lost, teshuvah is possible.

Second, for the mistake to be fixed it often requires assistance from others.

And third, it requires a belief in the goodness of the person wronged, a belief that even after so much time a gesture of genuine contrition will be accepted.

A story is told of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the father of the mussar movement. Once he went to a shoemaker to repair his shoes. It was late and dark. Noting the candle where the shoemaker was working was about to burn out, he said, “I’ll return tomorrow and try again.” “Do

not despair” said the shoemaker. “As long as the candle burns I can fix shoes.”

The message is clear. As long as there is light flickering, as long as there is a spark of life it is never too late. It is never too late to love; it is never too late to be in the formative years of life; it is never too late to start learning Torah; it is never too late to engage in religious commitment and spiritual striving; it is never too late to dream, to do, to accomplish; it is never too late to repair our ways.

And while we pray the repair takes place in life, sometimes it can occur even after death. Maybe this is one of the meanings of Yizkor. Like the yarhzeit candle flickering that many light for yizkor, it reminds us that it

is never too late even for those who have died, for whom we're saying Yizkor, to mend the fences, to say I'm sorry.

There we were, Toby and I, just a few weeks ago at the gates of the cemetery where our son is buried. This particular cemetery is built with open paths, few trees, wide enough and open enough for a cohen to enter. We followed the cemetery map and finally came to the grave of our infant child. Most mourning involves remembering a person's past life; when one, however, loses a child, every day one mourns not what was, but what could have been. Every day we would ask, and now at ten years or twenty or thirty what would Yitzchak Rafael be like, what would he be doing?

But that day as we approached the grave, we were mourning our little child. He was still four months old. The grave was small, the gravestone tiny. It reads simple words:

נ"פ
יל ריקי ובה
לאפר קחצי – Yitzchak Rafael
נהכה פסוי מייח מהרבאו הבוט ונב
December 3, 1970 – March 8, 1971
א"לשת רדא א"י – א"לשת ולסכ ו

We stood near the grave holding one another. We shed tears. Toby bent over to smooth the stone as if she was cleaning the room and making the bed of her little boy. I whispered to myself, *beni, beni, ha-ben yakir li*, my

precious precious son, Yitzchak Rafael, I'm sorry.
Please forgive me that I'm so late. I love you Yitzchak
Rafael. And I am convinced I could hear Yitzchak
Rafael say – it's ok Abba, I love you too.



*A rabbi must be very careful before presenting this type
of talk. The pulpit should never be used as a couch to
spill out one's personal issues.*

*I have given this talk because everyone is on a journey
of life. Life is not a stage. It is real, with highs and
lows. In sharing a personal journey of mine wherein for
so many years I failed, I offer the hope that everyone
will think of their journey of life with its twists and
turns, and recall the Yom Kippur message – it's never
too late.*

[i] In fact, the Zohar writes that the akeidah occurred on
Yom Kippur. There, Isaac begins his teshuvah process as
he is close to death, perhaps in punishment for the manner
Ishmael and Hagar were expelled and almost died in the

desert. Note the similarity of the language and narrative of the expulsion of Ishmael and akeidah story. And now Isaac comes from *Be'er Lehai Roi*, probably on Yom Kippur, bringing his teshuvah to closure as he brings Hagar back to Abraham.